



## Aural Objects

Christian Metz; Georgia Gurrieri

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## Aural Objects\*

How do we perceive the aural world? This problem is particularly important in the case of sound cinema (which today is simply *the cinema*), television, radio, etc. However, unless it is a question of the sounds of spoken language, sound has been studied far less than the visual, our civilization greatly privileging the latter. Caught between the two, “sound” is often left aside.<sup>1</sup>

How is it possible that we are capable of recognizing and isolating the sound of “lapping” on the sound track of a travelogue or among the confused rustling sounds heard when walking in a forest? How is this possible even when we don’t know its source, even if we identify other quite different sounds as “lapping” at other times? It must be that “lapping” exists as an autonomous aural object, the pertinent traits of its acoustic signifier corresponding to those of a linguistic signified, to the semes of the sememe “lapping”. Four of these traits appear readily, resulting from their “closest” commutations:

- 1.) This sound is relatively weak (as opposed to “uproar”, “yelling”, “ruckus”, etc.)
- 2.) It is discontinuous, whereas a “clamour”, a “whistling”, a “background noise”, isn’t.

\* *The selection constitutes the concluding section (pp. 153–61) of “Le perçu et le nommé,” first published in Pour une esthétique sans entrave—Mélanges Mikel Dufrenne (Paris: Editions 10/18, 1975), pp. 345–77, and reprinted in Essais sémiotiques (Paris: Klincksieck, 1977), pp. 129–61. In the earlier portions of this article, Christian Metz argues that the process of perception is inseparably entwined with that of naming, and thus with the cultural lexicon which informs the individual’s segmentation of the real world. In the section reprinted here, Metz extends this argument from visual objects to sound “objects,” e.g. the various identifiable segments into which we divide—according to culture-specific norms—the cinema sound track. (This translation is published here by the kind permission of Editions Klincksieck.)*

<sup>1</sup> A wide-spread opinion has it that the privileging of spoken language in our civilisation results in an underdevelopment of visual richness. And that isn’t false. But this is even more true of the aural richness of “sounds” which are in direct competition with language, due to the fact that language also has a signifier of the aural order.

3.) It is acoustically double, or at least not single, if by double one means that its occurrences break down into at least two successive sounds: /--/ . . . /--/ . . . /--/ . . . (In this respect, the first three phonemes of the linguistic signifier, *l-a-ppling*,<sup>2</sup> can be considered onomatopoeic.) Commutation shows that other identifiable sounds don't present this characteristic and that each of their occurrences is "single"; thus "detonation", or "blow" or "crash" when referring to sounds. It's the same opposition as between FLOP and CLACK.<sup>3</sup>

4.) This sound is experienced as "liquid", or as if caused by a liquid, whereas "rubbing" and "scraping" in their aural sememe present the trait "solid", while "hissing" and "whistling" are "gaseous".

These four traits, and all of those of the same group that I am leaving out, are what auditory perception and language have in common. There is no sense in asking whether they define the French word "lapping" (*clapotis*) or "lapping" as a characteristic noise, since the sound and the word exist only in relation to each other. Our four traits constitute the level of articulation where the two coincide, by virtue of the metacodic status of language.

### *Ideological Undermining of the Aural Dimension*

There is, nonetheless, a difference between the visual and the aural in their cultural definition. When I have recognized a "floor lamp" and can name it, the identification is completed and all that I could add would be adjectival in nature. But, on the contrary, if I have distinctly and consciously heard a "lapping" or a "whistling", I only have the feeling of a first identification, of a still incomplete recognition. This impression disappears only when I recognize that it was the lapping *of a river*, or the whistling *of the wind in the trees*: in sort, the recognition of a sound leads directly to the question: "A sound of what?" At first glance, this seems paradoxical, since the

<sup>2</sup>The original example given by Metz is the French word *clapotis*, in which he considers the first two phonemes, *c-l-apotis*, to be onomatopoeic.

<sup>3</sup>Onomatopoeias, which are exceptions to the "arbitrariness" of linguistic signification, represent the only case in which there is a direct connection between the signifier of the metacode (language) and the totality of the object-code (perceptual code). See the important work of Pierre Guiraud for cases of this type, where the linguistic signifier appears to be "motivated".

sememe of the initial identification (“whistling”, “hissing”, “rubbing”, etc.) corresponds to strictly aural profiles, while those of the final identification (the wind, the river), which have nothing of the auditory, name the source of the sound rather than the sound itself.

In language as the metacode of sounds, the most complete identification is obviously that which simultaneously designates the sound and its source (“rumble of thunder”). But if one of the two indicators has to be suppressed, it is curious to note that it’s the aural indicator that can most easily be suppressed with the least loss of recognizability. If I perceive a “rumble” without further specification, some mystery or suspense remains (horror and mystery films depend on this effect): the identification is only partial. However, if I perceive “thunder” without giving any attention to its acoustic characteristics, the identification is sufficient.

One might respond by saying that the example is tendentious, since thunder is an object consisting of nothing but sound (it can’t be seen, only lightning is seen). But the situation remains the same for objects which are not completely defined by their sound. If I allude to the “buzzing of a machine”, my reader doesn’t know exactly what I am talking about (“What machine?”). Although my classification of the sound was precise, I was too vague concerning its source. It would suffice for me to invert my axis of precision, for me to say “It’s the sound of a jet plane”, in order for everyone to feel that I expressed myself clearly, and to be satisfied. As soon as the source of the sound is recognized (jet plane), the taxonomies of the sound itself (buzzing, whistling, etc.) can only provide, at least in our era and geographic location, supplementary precisions, which are felt to be dispensable, of a *basically* adjectival nature, even when linguistically they are expressed by nouns. At the discursive level, we are no longer naming, but already describing to a certain extent.

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Ideologically, the aural source is an object, the sound itself a “characteristic.” Like any characteristic, it is linked to the object, and that is why identification of the latter suffices to evoke the sound,

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whereas the inverse is not true. “To understand” a perceptual event is not to describe it exhaustively but to be able to classify and categorize it:<sup>4</sup> to designate the object of which it is an example. Therefore, sounds are more often classified according to the objects which transmit them than by their own characteristics.

There is nothing natural in this situation: from a logical point of view, “buzzing” is an object, an acoustic object in the same way that a tulip is a visual object. Language takes that into account—or at least the lexicon does, in the absence of discourse—since a great number of recognizable sounds, relegated to the rank of characteristics, still correspond to nouns—this is a sort of compromise which doesn’t prevent auditory traits from participating more weakly than others in the dominant principle of object recognition. On the other hand, as soon as it becomes a question of naming the concept of aural object itself, it is necessary to add to the word “object” the epithet “aural”, as I have been doing and as advocates of concrete music do, while no precision is required for that which should logically be called “visual object”: we consider it self-evident that a banner is an object (with no adjective needed) but we hesitate over a hoot; it’s an infra-object, an object that is only aural.

### *On Primitive Substantialism*

There is a kind of primitive substantialism which is profoundly rooted in our culture (and without a doubt in other cultures as well, though not necessarily in all cultures) which distinguishes fairly rigidly the primary qualities that determine the list of objects (substances) and the secondary qualities which correspond to attributes applicable to these objects. This conception is reflected in the entire Western philosophic tradition beginning with notions put forth by Descartes and Spinoza. It is also clear that this “world view” has something to do with the subject-predicate structure particularly

<sup>4</sup>In the field of semiology, this idea has been developed in a particularly clear manner by Luis J. Prieto, notably in *Messages et signaux* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, collection “Le linguistique”, 1966). In chapter II, “Le mécanisme de l’indication”, p. 15–27, Prieto makes the point that every indication is an indication of a category, that a category has no meaning outside its relationship to a complementary category (or categories) in the realm of discourse which is presupposed in each case, etc.

prevalent in Indo-European languages.

For us, the primary qualities are in general visual and tactile. Tactile because touch is traditionally the very criteria of materiality.<sup>5</sup> Visual because the identification processes necessary to present-day life and to production techniques rely on the eye above all the other senses (it is only in language that the auditory order is “rehabilitated”, as if by compensation). The subject is too vast for this study. Nevertheless, it is possible to begin to discern certain qualities which seem to be “secondary”: sounds, (evoked above), olfactory qualities (a “scent” is barely an object), and even certain sub-dimensions of the visual order such as color.<sup>6</sup>

In a clothing store, if two articles of clothing have the same cut, and are only distinguishable by color, they are considered to be “the *same* sweater (or pair of pants) in two different colors.” Culture depends on the permanence of the object, language reaffirms it: only the adjective has varied. But if the two articles of clothing are the same color but have different cuts, no one will say or think that the store was offering “the same color in two different articles of clothing” (an incorrect formula, and not by accident, since color is in the grammatical position of subject). One would be more likely to say that these were “two articles of clothing”, this scarf and this skirt, for example, “of the same color”. The utterance puts color back in its place, that of predicate: these are two distinct objects which have an attribute in common.

### *“Off-Screen Sound” in the Cinema*

The division between primary and secondary qualities plays a large role in one of the classical problems of film theory, that of “off-screen sound”. In a film a sound is considered “off” (literally off the

<sup>5</sup>I had already been led to this remark via a completely different route in my article “A propos de l’impression de réalité au cinéma” (1965), taken from pp. 13–24 of vol. I of *Essais sur la signification au cinéma*. (Paris: Klincksieck, 1968), notably pp. 18–19.

<sup>6</sup>There is a reason why film without color, the black-and-white film was “possible” (culturally, in relation to demand) for many years, and still is to a large extent, that the odor-film has no past or future development, that the “sound talkie” (today’s usual film) is almost always more talk than sound, the noises being so impoverished and stereotyped. In fact, the only cinematographic aspects that interest everyone, and not just some specialists, are the image and speech.

screen) when in fact it is the sound's source that is off the screen, therefore an “off-screen voice” is defined as one which belongs to a character who does not appear (visually) on the screen. We tend to forget that a sound in itself is never “off”: either it is audible or it doesn't exist. When it exists, it could not possibly be situated within the interior of the rectangle or outside of it, since the nature of sounds is to diffuse themselves more or less into the entire surrounding space: sound is simultaneously “in” the screen, in front, behind, around, and throughout the entire movie theater.<sup>7</sup>

On the contrary, when a visual element is said to be “off”, it really is: it can be reconstructed by inference in relation to what is visible within the rectangle, but it is not seen. A well-known example would be “the lure”: the presence of a person on a side of the screen is surmised when you can only see a hand or shoulder; the rest is out of the visual field.

The situation is clear: the language used by technicians and studios, without realizing it, conceptualizes sound in a way that makes sense only for the image. We claim that we are talking about sound, but we are actually thinking of the visual image of the sound's source.

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This confusion is obviously reinforced by a characteristic of sound that is physical and not social: spatial anchoring of aural events is much more vague and uncertain than that of visual events. The two sensory orders don't have the same relationship to space, sound's

<sup>7</sup>This relates to another characteristic fact about present-day cinema. The visual events are only “reproduced” by means of certain distortions in perspective (absence of binocular depth, the rectangular screen which distorts real vision, etc.). But auditory aspects, providing that the recording is well done, undergo no appreciable loss in relation to the corresponding sound in the real world: in principle, nothing distinguishes a gun shot heard in a film from a gun shot heard on the street. Béla Balàzs, the film theoretician, used to say that “Sounds have no images”. Thus the sounds of a film spread into space as do sounds in life, or almost. This difference in perceptual status between what is called ‘reproduction’ in the case of the visible, and that to which the same name has been given in the case of the audible, already seemed important to me in “Problèmes actuels de théorie du cinéma”, *Essais sur la signification au cinéma*, Vol. II, pp. 57–58 and in *Langage et cinéma*, pp. 209–210.

relationship being much less precise, restrictive, even when it indicates a general direction (but it rarely indicates a really precise site, which on the contrary is the rule for the visible). It is perfectly understandable that film technicians should have based their classification on the less elusive of the two elements. (However, it should be remembered that the phylogenetic choice of a particular acoustic material, the sound of the voice, for the signifiers of human language, is probably due to similar reasons: phonic communication is not interrupted by darkness or by night. You can speak to someone who is in back of you, or who is behind something, or whose location is unknown. The relatively weak relation to space provides multiple advantages which the human race would not have benefitted from had a visual language been chosen.)

But, to get back to off-screen sound, the laws of physics do not adequately explain this persistent confusion between the aural object itself and the visual image of its source (yet even the most literal definition of off-screen sound rests on this confusion). There is something else behind it, something cultural that we have already encountered in this study: the conception of sound as an attribute, as a non-object, and therefore the tendency to neglect its own characteristics in favor of those of its corresponding “substance,” which in this case is the visible object, which has emitted the sound.

### *Semiology and Phenomenology*

The above heading poses an epistemological question which is not new. It seems to me that the semiological project in its entirety, because of its initial anchoring in a concern for the perceptible signifier and its perceptible transformations, etc., defines itself in a certain way as the continuation of phenomenological inspiration. I myself have “admitted” to this necessary stage (this debt, also) in the first chapter of my first book.<sup>8</sup>

Of course, these “continuations” are also always reversals, reactions. The phenomenologists wanted to “describe” the spontaneous

<sup>8</sup> *Essais sur la signification au cinéma* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1968), published thanks to Mikel Dufrenne, to whom we pay hommage today in the diverse studies which compose this volume [The reference is to *Mélanges Mikel Dufrenne* (Pour une esthétique sans entrave”), where Metz’s article was first published.]

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apprehension of things (and they sometimes did that with a correctness which will become less quickly outmoded than certain semio-logical overstatements). They were not sufficiently aware of the fact that this “apprehension” is in itself a product, that therefore it could very well be “otherwise” in cultures not of the describer. But, (and I’m not trying to create paradoxes) it remains true that these conclusions are also beginnings. It is a great illusion of positivistic scientism to blind itself to all that is non-scientific in science, or in the effort toward science, without which it could not even exist. We are all, at some time, phenomenologists, and those who declare themselves as such at least have the merit of admitting to a certain kind of relationship to the world, which is not the only possible relationship, nor the only desirable one, but one which exists in everybody, even if it is hidden or unknown.

When I think about my own field of research, cinematographic analysis, how could I hide from myself—and why would I—the fact that an entire body of previous cultural knowledge, without which a “first viewing” of the film would not even be a *viewing* (nor would any of the subsequent “viewings”, which become more fragmented, less descriptive and, in another sense, more “semio-logical”)—that an entire body of knowledge already present in my immediate perception is necessarily mobilized to make it possible for me to work? And how could I miss the fact that this body of knowledge is—that it is and isn’t—the “perceptual *cogito*” of phenomenology? The content is the same, the status we grant it is not.

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In this study, I wanted to show that the perceptual object is a constructed unity, *socially constructed*, and also (to some extent) a linguistic unity. We find ourselves quite far, you could say, from the “adverse spectacle” of subject and object, from the cosmological as well as existential (or at least transcendental) “there is” in which phenomenology wanted to place our presence in objects, and the presence of objects in us. I am not so sure, or else this “distance” is only along certain axes, and does not imply a complete rupture of the

horizon. Obviously, I spoke of semes, of pertinent optical traits, etc., that is to say, of elements whose nature is to have no lived existence and which are on the contrary—on the contrary or for that very reason?—the conditions of possibility of the lived, the structures of production which create the lived and are abolished in it, which simultaneously find in it the site of their manifestation and their negation: the objective determinants of subjective feeling. To concentrate interest on this latent stratum, is to stray from the phenomenological path. But the manifest stratum, besides the fact that it has its own reality, authorizing potential or completed studies, is the only stratum available to us in the beginning, even though we soon leave it behind.

I have tried to understand why perception proceeds by means of objects. But I first felt, and felt strongly, that it does in fact proceed this way: phenomenologists have always made the same claim. In order for me to have tried to dismantle the “objects” which so strike the native (and at first, even in order for me to have had that desire), it was necessary that I be that native myself, and that I be struck by the same things as he. Every psychoanalytic project begins by a “phenomenology”, according to the analyst’s own terminology. This is true not only for this domain. Every time something is to be explained, it is more prudent to begin by experiencing it.

translated by Georgia Gurrieri